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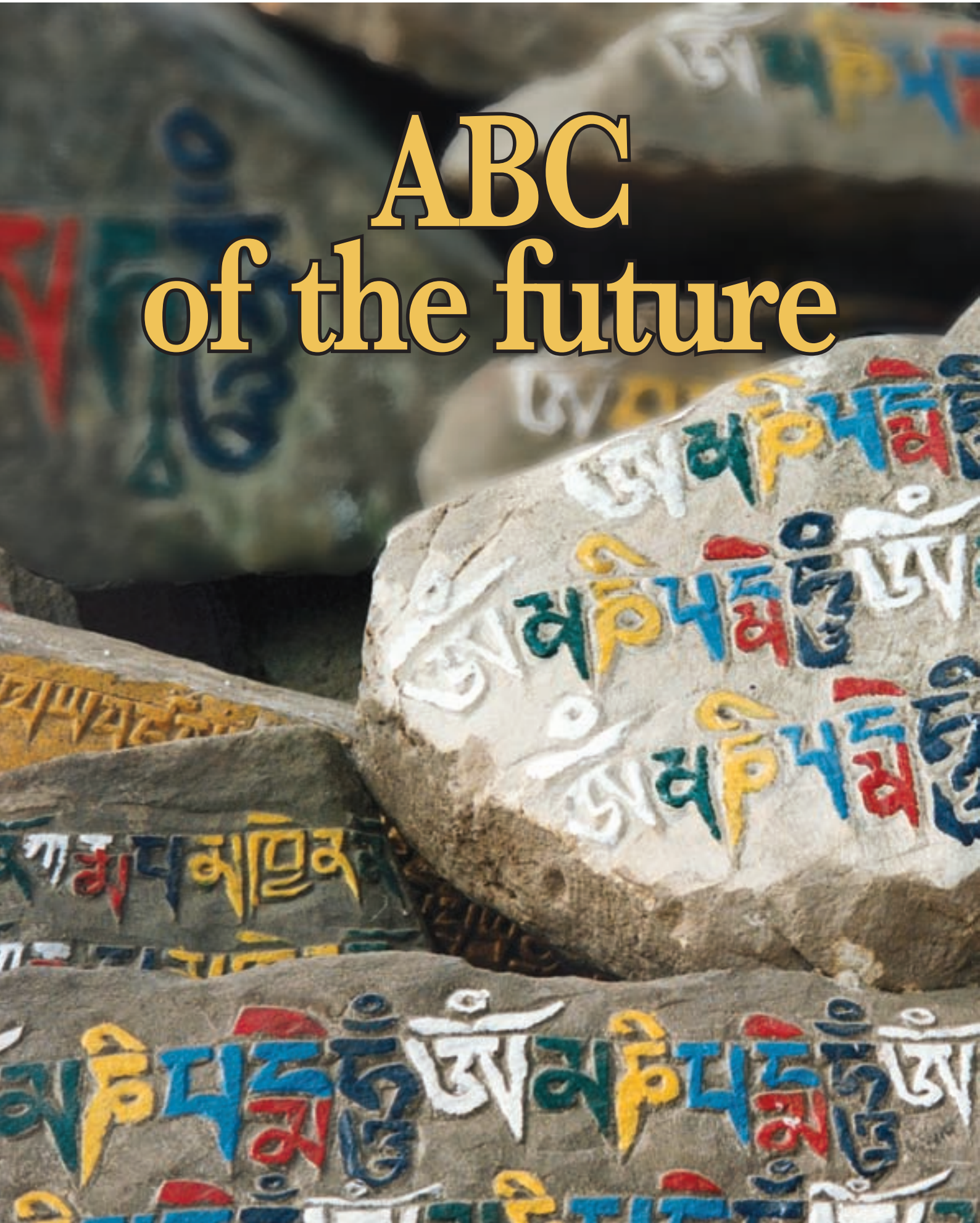
ABC of the future



the UNESCO Courier

Contents

2007 number 7

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Stone inscriptions at the Swayanbhunath sanctuary in Kathmandu (Nepal).

ABC OF THE FUTURE

Nadine Gordimer, **N. Scott Momaday**, **Philippe Claudel**, **Fatou Diome**, **Gisèle Pineau** and **Abdourahman Waberi** *are some of the writers who have joined UNESCO in its fight against illiteracy. In this issue, published on the occasion of International Literacy Day (8 September), their texts appear side by side with stories on the five laureates of the 2007 UNESCO Literacy Prizes.*

NADINE GORDIMER: THE IMAGE AND THE WORD

Literacy is an inalienable human right, says Nadine Gordimer, 1991 Nobel Prize for Literature. But, according to the South African novelist, being able to read a billboard doesn't mean one is literate. **3**

THE LONG-LASTING MEMORY OF STORYBOOKS

The Tanzanian Children's Book Project has just been awarded the UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize for its work promoting the love of books among children and adults. This work has proved very positive in helping the young perform at school, and adults in the community. **5**

LITERACY VERSUS POVERTY

An extensive literacy programme carried out by the Community Education Administration Centre in the poor rural areas of Longsheng (China) has produced spectacular results in a decade, earning it UNESCO's International Reading Association Literacy Prize for 2007. **8**

FROM IDEA TO BREAKTHROUGH, THE INSPIRING STORY OF TOSTAN

Literacy, microcredit, rejection of female circumcision – these are among the achievements of Tostan, 2007 laureate of UNESCO's King Sejong Literacy Prize. The NGO focuses on adolescents and adults, most of whom have never set foot in school. **10**

REACH OUT AND READ: LINKING LITERACY AND HEALTH

One of UNESCO's two Confucius Prizes for Literacy was attributed this year to the U.S. organization, Reach Out and Read, for its work with health care providers to reach low-income children at risk of dropping out of school. **12**

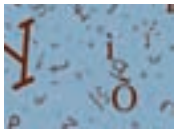
A TESTIMONY OF HOPE FOR A BELEAGUERED AREA

The Nigerian NGO, Family Re-orientation Education and Empowerment (FREE) was awarded the UNESCO Confucius Prize for Literacy for creating a network of learning centres. It provides literacy skills to adults, especially to women and out-of-school girls. **15**

THE TWO TRACKS OF MY LIFE

Abdourahman A. Waberi is among the writers who have joined UNESCO in its fight against illiteracy. Here is an extract from his text on the subject, to be published by the Organization in its forthcoming book, 'The Alphabet of Hope'. **18**

LITERACY: KEY DATES



Immediately after the Second World War, literacy was not high on the agenda of most governments. UNESCO played a pioneering role in putting it there. **19**

WRITERS FOR LITERACY

UNESCO asked some contemporary writers to lobby for literacy for all and to foster a literate world. Here are some extracts of what they wrote. **20**

Literacy is an inalienable human right, says Nadine Gordimer, 1991 Nobel Prize for Literature. But, according to the South African novelist, being able to read a billboard doesn't mean one is literate.

NADINE GORDIMER:
THE IMAGE AND THE WORD

© Sophie Bassouls

Nadine Gordimer is committed to UNESCO's cause in its fight against illiteracy.

In the beginning was the Word. The Word that was Creation. Its transformation into the written word came to us when it was first scratched as a hieroglyph or ideogram on a stone or traced on papyrus, and when it travelled from parchment to print in Gutenberg. That was the next genesis: of literacy. It was and is the miraculous ability that humans alone possess within the miracle of creation (we have devised the means to take to the air).

Our new millennium, stated as dedicated to defining and upholding human rights, surely should list literacy as an inalienable one?

Yet UNESCO reports that over 700 million adults in our era cannot read or write and more than 72 million children do not go to school, deprived of their rightful heritage, literacy. In South Africa, where I write these words, illiteracy is almost 50% in certain rural areas. What are the reasons, world-wide or nearer wherever one's home may be? Poverty and lack of educational facilities are the obvious ones in poor and developing countries. The disastrous economic effect is seen from the humble levels – at an automobile assembly plant in South Africa, research found that many workers on the line could follow only spoken orders, unable to read any written notification. At the level of higher education for the professions, universities are faced with the problem of students ostensibly qualified for entry who do not have the vocabulary or skilled use of the written word necessarily assumed for university courses. The shortage of suitably competent candidates for positions essential in development of governance, social services, industry and commerce, is thus evident. President Mbeki recently said that, in order to serve the needs of South Africa's fast-growing economy – the leading one on the African continent in terms of resources and infrastructure – he believes we shall have to import qualified individuals from other countries to fill the vacancies, while assisting to raise the capabilities of South Africans to fulfill such positions, particularly in industry. An upgraded version of the adage, "each-one-teach-one".

But we come back to the absolute. It shouldn't need to be stated, but has to be, it seems. Literacy is the basis of all learning. Even if one goes on to the differently profound numero-ideogrammatic knowledges of science.

And, on the way back to the source that is the written word, we arrive at a presently prevalent intermediate condition of literacy: semi-literacy. This is no doubt exacerbated in multilingual countries where, as a result of long colonization, a foreign language became and remains a lingua franca, the

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Philae temples on the Island of Agilkia.

© Roger Blum

"The bedtime story of middleclass childhood has been replaced by the hour in front of the TV screen", says Nadine Gordimer.

second language, not the mother tongue, the natal Word, of the inhabitant. One would accept that you are unlikely to be able to read and write the lingua franca as confidently, precisely, as, once master of the alphabet, you surely could read and write your own. But a distinguished writer and academic, Professor Es'kia Mphahlele, tells me that black South Africans emerge from their schooling semi-literate in the reading and writing of their own mother tongues, just as white South Africans and those of other ethno-linguistic backgrounds are semi-literate in theirs. To be able to read the legend on a billboard and the bubble-enclosed dialogue of Spacemen in a comic book, while unable to understand the vocabulary of a poem or follow in prose literature the meaningful variations of syntax, the use of words in ways that open up new depths of self-comprehension – that is not literacy. It is not what every individual should have by human right.

The developing countries, although with more reasons for producing only the halfway to literacy, are not alone in this cultural state. Colleges in the USA report the same result of their educational system, reflection of current cultural values of their society. In Britain there is the same dismay at young men and women, born and educated in the country of the birth of the English language, who cannot read or write using the great resources of their mother tongue.

So, while poverty and lack of educational opportunity are responsible for the great void in our world that is illiteracy, this tragic situation is not the prime cause, let alone the justification for the widespread phenomenon of semi-literacy.

The fact is that we are conjoined, all countries long developed or struggling to develop across the abyss between rich nations and poor, under threat of the Image against the Written Word. From the first third of the 20th Century the image has been challenging the power of the written word as the stimulation of the imagination, the opening of human receptivity. The bedtime story of middle class childhood has been replaced by the hour in front of the TV screen; in shack settlements all over the poor countries of the globe the TV aerial signifies the battery-run screen where no book is to be found. School and community libraries don't exist in villages and towns where video cassettes are for hire. Yes, TV images are accompanied by the spoken word, sometimes by text, but it is the picture that decides how secondary the Word's role shall be.

The American writer, William Gass, defines best the Written Word, in its home, the book: 'We shall not understand what a book is, and why a book has the value many persons have… If we forget how important to it is its body, the building that has been built to hold its lines of language safely together… Words on a screen have virtual qualities, to be sure…but they have no materiality, they are only shadows, and when the light shifts they'll be gone. Off the screen they do not exist as words. They do not wait to be reseen, reread; they only wait to be remade, relit.'

Yes, the Image of text, of the Word, disappears off the screen; to recall it, along with the other visuals, you have to have an apparatus, a cell, a battery, access to an electric power connection. The book needs none of these. Simply held in the hand it can be read, turned to again and again, on a bus, in the subway, in the bath, on a mountain top, in a queue.

This is no fuddy-duddy turning away from progress. The vast advances in communications technology are an information revolution that has great possibilities for social development if well used, which means made economically available to the millions in the world whose lives will otherwise be bulldozed by the financial oligarchy of globalization.

But information does not, it cannot, ever replace, outmoded illumination – searching knowledge of the human intellect and spirit that, all readers know, comes in communication with the Word in its infinitely portable, available home between hard or paperback covers.

First it became the book of the movie.
Now it is the book of the website.
Don't let it happen.

Nadine Gordimer,
South African novelist,
Nobel Prize for Literature 1991

(Extract from *The Alphabet of Hope: Writers for Literacy,* UNESCO)

The Tanzanian Children's Book Project has just been awarded the UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize for its work promoting the love of books among children and adults. This work has proved very positive in helping the young perform at school, and adults in the community.

THE LONG-LASTING MEMORY OF STORYBOOKS

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Pupils reading the story of Tabu, a boy from the village of Taire.

Maasai women were inspired by a visit to Children's Book Project (CBP) libraries in the Morogoro area to build a temporary classroom for their children, hire a teacher and ask the District Education Officer (DEO) for books. The DEO turned to the CBP, which sent the newly established school reading materials and included it in its reading programme.

"The Maasai women's reason for starting the school was to empower their children for them to gain access to information, a stronger voice in the household and help their mothers in managing finances," the Project's Secretary, Pili Dumea explains.

And they were right: schools joining CBP improve. Mwajuma Tyeah, headmistress of Mwendapole primary school (Kibaha district, Coast Region), a school with 876 pupils and only seven classes, confirms this: "Since we became part of the programme in 1998, the school has significantly improved. Performance is better and the pupils and teachers are more skilled. For the last three years, all our pupils who sat for the standard national examination passed to the next level, compared to about five years ago, when only 24% to 25% passed. We are also among the top three schools in the district."

Sofia Beda, an 11-year-old pupil at the school, agrees: "Pupils from neighbouring schools come here and that is a good sign, it means we are better! I have read most of the books in the school library, which helped me learn about different topics through interesting stories told in our own national language, Kiswahili, which is easier to understand than English."

Social change

The Children's Book Project, a non-governmental organization, was launched in 1991 by CODE, a Canadian charitable organization, as a measure to alleviate the acute shortage of books in Tanzania, particularly children's books. "Before CBP, there was a serious lack of reading books in schools in the country, because the government monopolized publishing houses […] There was a need for intervention; CBP intervened," Ms Dumea says. The NGO's aim was to develop a strong reading culture, sustained by effective reading skills and the provision of quality reading materials.

CBP collaborates with publishers to produce its own selection of children's books in Kiswahili. It then purchases 3000 of the 5000 copies of each title for free distribution. "Our objective is to develop and promote excellent quality and culturally suitable books in Kiswahili and make these materials accessible," CBP's Marcus Mbigili says. To date, 237 titles have been distributed to 3642 schools in the country, and the demand for CBP-trained writers has increased in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. So far, 356 writers, 191 of them women, have been trained in CBP workshops. "In general, women are sensitive writers; some of them draw on their own experiences. They advocate social change in their writing. For example, women from Zanzibar

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A few publications from the Children's Book Project.

prefer writing on gender inequality," Ms Dumea comments.

CBP also organizes training workshops for illustrators, publishers and printers. As the demands in health, environment, educational and human rights practices evolve, the programme teaches new creative strategies and techniques in presenting relevant information and encourages indigenous creation.

In 1997, the NGO initiated a readership programme. The programme develops primary school teachers' skills in teaching reading and writing based on progressive child-centred methodologies. "We have competitions, reading tents and book donations, all as a part of motivating children and adults to read books," Ms Dumea explains.

The remotest areas

Today, the Children's Book Project has established 96 school libraries among 99 programme schools. Although these libraries were meant for students and teachers, community members increasingly visit them: "Data from 11 districts showed that more than 9000 borrowers in the programme school libraries were adults. And last year, we awarded Zena Muuigi, a woman from Bingwi village in the Coast region, for having read 100 titles in a year," CBP Assistant Monitoring Coordinator, Mary Kihampa, says.

The Project is bringing about social change and adults are now benefiting from this project that was started to benefit their children. "In rural areas, school libraries are centres for recreation and education, where village meetings and discussions on various issues are conducted. Therefore, adults get the opportunity to see the books and read them, discuss and apply the skills in their daily life," Ms Dumea says, and, she adds, "They inspire their friends to attend literacy classes. Frequent adult readers have gained self esteem and personal empowerment. Women have gained confidence in speaking during village meetings and running for village positions."

CBP wishes to expand, but lacks resources to do so. Ms Dumea urges: "We would like to go to all schools, especially those in the remotest of areas, but we lack sufficient resources. We need the government's support."

CBP spends just over US$ 325,000 a year and is funded by various international and national governmental and non-governmental donors from Europe and North America. "Our strategies can be adopted in schools to improve the learning situation, build a reading culture in both children and adults which, in the long run, will lead to sustainable development," says Ms Dumea, concluding: "There is a need to rekindle the desire to read amongst society at large, for, beyond the textbooks, it is the memory of the story books that lasts longest in our minds."

© UNESCO/Gladys Fahari

At the Mwendapole primary school, aside from the school's main library, every class has a mini-library of its own.

Gladys Fahari,
Tanzanian journalist

The Key to the World

© UNESCO/Claire Servoz

Letter boxes in Floreana, Galápagos Islands, Ecuador.

Our gaze alights on the world. Our heart beats as the world beats. Our hands caress the world's curves, our laughter tickles the world and our tears leave it trembling, but the world would be nothing without our words to tell it, without our words to believe it, without our words to build it.

Small letters, big sentences, pebbles of ink on white deserts of paper and screen, signs of stone, scratches and traces, lines of sand, we draw at the surface of the earth a second landscape that remains and recalls truths and memory to other humans.

Because reading is indeed remembering the one who lived and who wrote. And writing is indeed thinking about the one who will come after us and, in the invisible books, rub up against our stirred thoughts, still living when we are dead, despite our long-ago disappearance.

Take all these letters left by all men, these letters that tell our humanity, take them in your pocket, in your mouth, in your dreams, in your fists.

Keep them like the treasures they are.

Let no one steal them, but on the contrary share them with everyone.

Help the one who hesitates to grab them, who struggles to befriend them.

Be his master so he can become one himself.

Make him like you.

Because our first freedom is that of language, spoken language, murmured, written and deciphered, friend language, mother language, sweet language, language that comes under our fingers, on our lips and under our gaze like the great mirror of our humanity

.

Philippe Claudel,
French author

An extensive literacy programme carried out by the Community Education Administration Centre in the poor rural areas of Longsheng (China) has produced spectacular results in a decade, earning it UNESCO's International Reading Association Literacy Prize for 2007.

LITERACY VERSUS POVERTY

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A husband teaching his wife.

Situated in a mountainous area in the north-east of Guangxi Zhuang, Longsheng Autonomous County is inhabited by some 170,000 people, three-quarters of them belonging to ethnic minorities (Miao, Yao, Tong and Zhuang). The literacy rate is today particularly high, thanks to the Community Education Administration Centre.

As part of its literacy programme for women (launched in 1992) and its programme of poverty eradication through education (1998), the Centre has virtually eliminated illiteracy: nearly 100% of young adults in the county can now read and write. And the 3700 ethnic minority women living in the county that were found to be illiterate in 1997, had all acquired literacy in 2000, according to a survey.

Made-to-measure instruction

While it is difficult to end illiteracy, it is even more difficult to maintain the literacy rate at a satisfactory level. This is why the Centre also launched the idea of home schooling: teachers go to women's homes to teach them to read and write, and follow up to make sure they don't forget what they learned.

The key to the Centre's success is its use of teaching methods geared to local conditions: bilingual textbooks (Mandarin-Yao, Mandarin-Zhuang, Mandarin-Tong and Mandarin-Miao); classes comprising students who belong to the same ethnic group; flexible schedules (night school, classes during the off-season); enhanced education curricula (studies associated with practical activities); classes according to category of student (boys, girls); possibilities for boarding, individual assistance and so on. Another essential ingredient is the involvement of all community members, from the youngest to the oldest, by way of village cadres and activist farmers. And finally, the teaching is effective because it creates a link with development of agriculture, tourism and services.

Forty thousand fewer poor people

Pan Jufeng, for example, learned to read and write at age 40 through the Centre's programmes, after which she trained another 35 illiterate women and created a song and dance troupe with her 'pupils'. Later, the members of this ensemble, having taken elementary English lessons, focused on tourism. The team now receives hundreds of visitors a day. They have become a pillar of the region's tourism.

Pan Jufeng symbolizes the Centre's success, one might add. She took part in the national women's literacy contest held in Beijing and won first prize.

What proved crucial for the Longsheng communities was combining literacy with technological

training, health and family planning, environmental protection and other areas connected to everyday life. Today, numerous farmers and artisans have technical aptitude in two or three specialties besides their own. In 2006, the average income per inhabitant rose to 1978.4 yuan (US$ 261), or 5.7 times more than in 1990. The number of poor people decreased by about 40,000.

Zhao Liming,
Deputy Director of Communication,
Longsheng County

© UNESCO/M. Zhao
Students in a Tong village.

Joining forces against illiteracy

After Doha (Qatar), Beijing (China) hosted the second regional conference in support of literacy. Before the end of 2008, four more meetings of this kind will be held to boost the fight against illiteracy.

What is the best way to promote literacy in countries such as Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, where an extraordinary linguistic diversity prevails? How can people learn to read and write in rural and isolated areas? What initiatives can benefit migrants? These questions and a host of others were covered in discussions during the Sub-Regional Conference in Support of Literacy in East Asia, South-East Asia and the Pacific held in Beijing (China) on 31 July and 1 August.

The conference, bringing together more than 200 participants from 15 countries, was the second in a series of six regional and sub-regional conferences organized by UNESCO with the aim of reducing illiteracy around the world. The first took place in Doha (Qatar) in March 2007. Four more conferences along the same lines in Mali, India, Costa Rica and Azerbaijan will be held between now and the end of 2008. The objective of the meetings is to build cooperation between stakeholders – high-level policy-makers, international organizations, NGOs, civil society members – as well as to identify effective projects and mobilize resources.

These initiatives follow up the White House Conference on Global Literacy organized in New York on 18 September 2006, hosted by Laura Bush, First Lady of the United States and Honorary Ambassador for the United Nations Literacy Decade. The conference kicked off an extensive international campaign promoting literacy in the context of the UN Literacy Decade (2003-2012).

Literacy, microcredit, rejection of female circumcision – these are among the achievements of Tostan, 2007 laureate of UNESCO's King Sejong Literacy Prize. The NGO focuses on adolescents and adults, most of whom have never set foot in school. Distinguishing characteristics: mother tongue instruction and use of traditional modes of communication.

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FROM IDEA TO BREAKTHROUGH, THE INSPIRING STORY OF TOSTAN

Saturday, 21 July 2007. At 9 a.m., Sam Ndiaye has yet to emerge from its torpor. A diffuse, light torpor, unlike that of so many other Senegalese villages. A joyful torpor! Because this village of nearly 500 souls, located some 80 kilometres from Dakar and two kilometres from the nearest asphalt road, may not yet have electricity, but its inhabitants exude a rare joie de vivre.

Warm welcomes sound from all sides – from the village chief who receives the required courtesy visit most cordially, from the head of the local Degoo organization ("accord" in Wolof, Senegal's most widespread language), and in between, from Sam Ndiaye's women and children.

Besides Senegalese hospitality, which is legendary, particularly in the rural world, the population's enthusiasm is prompted by the nature of the visit: a journalist, escorted by Tostan's programme director, has come to profile the achievements of the non-governmental organization, which has gained recognition with its remarkable non-formal basic education programme. And as it turns out, Sam Ndiaye played a significant role in the inspiring story of Tostan, because it all began here.

A Wolof word, 'tostan' means 'hatch' or 'breakthrough'. And, judging by the results, we can indeed talk about a genuine breakthrough, to the great satisfaction of Molly Melching, Executive Director of the NGO, which aims to provide participants with the knowledge and skills they need to become empowered individuals, able to take charge of their economic development and bring about social change within their community.

Mother language, key to success

Ms Melching founded Tostan in 1991, after developing the Demb ak Tey ('Yesterday and Today' in Wolof) resource centre, which also offered non-formal education, from 1976 to 1988. She took advantage of suggestions from participants and outside evaluations to better adapt her new NGO's programme to people's needs.

At the beginning, recalls Khalidou Sy, Tostan's Programme Director, the goal was to promote non-formal education in Dakar's working-class Medina neighbourhood for children in difficult circumstances, who weren't part of the normal National Education system. "These children thus had access to books, theatre, puppets, various games and other activities inspired by Senegalese tradition and in their mother tongue," he explains. The approach was further refined as time went on and produced tangible results, which are visible in Sam Ndiaye and numerous other communities.

As for Ms Melching, she emphasizes "the importance of human rights education, not at university or academic level, but at the people's level, in their national languages." Human rights education is "the foundation of all community development projects," she explains.

But if there's one facet that makes Executive Director Melching particularly proud, it's the empowerment of women. Those who have participated in Tostan's programmes now express their ideas in public and participate in decision-making within their families and communities. Some have emerged as leaders of opinion, like the Malicounda village women who became pioneers when they decided to put an end to the harmful ancestral tradition of female circumcision.

Education = Self-determination

Tostan operates outside the formal education system and is directed at people who, for the most part, have never attended school. Its capacity-building programme for communities aims to provide participants with life skills related to democracy, human rights, health, hygiene, literacy, business management, accounting, microcredit, etc. It lasts for 30 months and uses traditional modes of communication including discussion, song, dance, theatre and poetry. It is implemented by specially-trained volunteers who usually belong to the same ethnic group as the community concerned. The facilitators live in the villages where they give their classes, three times a week, to groups of 30 participants. Each village has a class for adolescents and another for adults.

With international headquarters in Washington, D.C. in the United States, where five people work (one staff and four volunteers), Tostan runs its African office in the Senegalese capital. Besides the 66 permanent employees in Dakar and Thies, in Senegal, 303 contractors work all around the country. In addition, more than 40 staff and 160 contractors are scattered throughout Guinea, Somalia and Gambia. A similar programme has just been launched in Mauritania.

For the last 15 years, Tostan has developed relationships with various donors including UNICEF, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Wallace Foundation, the Wallace Global Fund and the Hilda and Jacob Blaustein Foundation, as well as other foundations and individual donors. In 2006 its annual expenses totalled more than US$ 3,200,000.

In a UNESCO publication*, Cynthia Guttman rightly pointed out that Tostan demonstrates how people who have received no formal education, coming from villages with minimal resources, can improve their environments and their lives, thanks to a well-designed programme that opens the way to greater self-determination.

Mamadou Amat,
Senegalese journalist

**Breaking through: TOSTAN's non-formal basic education programme in national languages in Senegal, UNESCO*, 1995*

© UNESCO/Teresa Murtagh

A teacher and his pupils at a primary school in Kadji, Gao, Mali.

The teacher (Extract)

I owe him Descartes, I owe him Montesquieu, I owe him Victor Hugo, I owe him Molière, I owe him Balzac, I owe him Marx, I owe him Dostoyevsky, I owe him Hemingway, I owe him Léopold Sédar Senghor, I owe him Aimé Césaire, I owe him Simone de Beauvoir, Marguerite Yourcenar, Mariama Bâ and the others.

I owe him my first love poem written in secret, I owe him the first French song I murmured, because I owe him my first phoneme, my first morpheme, my first French sentence read, heard and understood. I owe him my first French letter written crookedly across my piece of broken slate. I owe him school. I owe him learning. In short, I owe him my Ambiguous Adventure*. Because I never stopped hounding him, he gave me everything: the letter, the number, the key to the world. And because he fulfilled my first conscious wish, to go to school, I owe him all my little French can-can steps towards the light.

Fatou Diome,
Senegalese novelist

*Reference to "L'aventure ambiguë" by Senegalese author Cheikh Hamidou Kane.

One of UNESCO's two Confucius Prizes for Literacy was attributed this year to the U.S. organization, Reach Out and Read, for its work with health care providers to reach low-income children at risk of dropping out of school.

REACH OUT AND READ: LINKING LITERACY AND HEALTH

Three-year-old Miguel lived in Los Angeles, California, with his mother, who faced chronic illness, depression and poverty. Despite this, she brought Miguel to the doctor for his well-child visits. Each time they left the clinic, Miguel clutched a brand-new Reach Out and Read book. Miguel and his mother cherished those books. Two years later, Miguel is the number one reader in his kindergarten class. He loves to read and he looks set to become a lifelong learner. Miguel is certain to face many obstacles, but Reach Out and Read has brought hope to his life. His success, says his paediatrician, is a testament to the power of Reach Out and Read to help families break the cycle of poverty.

This year, thousands of doctors will give 4.6 million new books to 2.8 million infants, toddlers and preschoolers from low-income families at check-ups and advise their parents about the importance of reading. The only American literacy programme featured at the recent White House Conference on Global Literacy, Reach Out and Read doctors distribute new books at more than 3000 paediatric practices, hospitals, clinics and health centres throughout all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. To date, American doctors have given out more than 20 million books. International programmes modelled on Reach Out and Read have been started in Bangladesh, Italy, Israel, the Philippines, England, and Canada.

© Reach out and Read

Dr Kenneth L. Fox with a young patient.

Language and health

Reach Out and Read focuses on the most vulnerable children, 6 months to 5 year-olds living in or near poverty. Today, Reach Out and Read helps about 25% of America's most impoverished children. And the number grows daily. Each child who participates in Reach Out and Read starts kindergarten with a home library of up to 10 books and a parent who has heard, at every well-child visit, about the importance of books and reading. Doctors participating in Reach Out and Read distribute carefully selected new, developmentally and culturally appropriate books – starting with board books for babies and moving on to more complex picture

books for preschoolers. Bilingual books are available in 12 languages. Some sites also have volunteer readers who read to children in the waiting rooms.

Research shows that the programme really works. Parents who get books and literacy counselling from their doctors and nurses are more likely to read to their young children, read to them more often, and provide more books at home. Low-income children exposed to Reach Out and Read show improved language development, a critical component of school readiness. Children score four to eight points higher on vocabulary tests, giving 2-year-olds a six-month head start developmentally. Reach Out and Read is endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Reach Out and Read was co-founded by Barry Zuckerman, M.D., a 6'5" (1.95 m) gentle giant who has great warmth, passion and unwavering determination that all children start life with books in their home and a parent who reads to them.

"Reach Out and Read started as a single programme at Boston City Hospital [now Boston Medical Centre] with the goal of making literacy promotion a standard part of paediatric primary care," says Zuckerman, Board Chair and CEO of the organization, who is also Professor and Chairman of the Department of Paediatrics of the Boston Medical Centre at Boston University School of Medicine. "Today, we reach millions of at-risk children in the U.S. and serve as a model for programmes around the world. But we are far from reaching our goal of providing books to every child and literacy counselling to every parent living in poverty."

® Read Out and Read

Reading is always fun!

Taking advantage of existing structures

Although, by international standards, the U.S. is considered a rich country, 35% of American children start school without the language skills necessary to learn to read.

"One of the tremendous advantages of Reach Out and Read," says Perri Klass, M.D., Medical Director of Reach Out and Read and Professor of Journalism and Paediatrics at New York University, "is that it takes advantage of the existing

© Reach out and Read

You can read everywhere.

health care structures, which are to be found in virtually every country in the world to deliver basic health care to children."

Nearly 46,000 medical providers have been trained by Reach Out and Read since its founding in 1989. The programme now spends a total of over US$30 million per annum on its activities across the U.S.A. and receives support from the U.S. Department of Education, as well as 12 states and cities. It also receives donations from corporations, foundations, and individuals.

While doctors give a lot of important advice at check-ups, few interventions have been the object of as much research that substantiates their ability to impact behaviour at home. "Reach Out and Read has one of the strongest records of peer-reviewed research support of any primary care intervention," Dr. Klass says. "Because we give families the books, we provide the tool to follow the advice."

"Improved language is the single strongest predictor for school success. Reach Out and Read is working to reach parents and children at the critical stage before they enter kindergarten so children enter school prepared for success in reading."

Lauren Fasbinder,
Fasbinder & Associates

On the value of Literacy

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Scott Momaday.

As a poet, I cannot imagine a life without words. Language is the element in which the mind lives, and it is the very basis of human being.

It is that which distinguishes Man from all other creatures. To speak, to read and write, to encounter the power and beauty and magic of words–these are gifts that enrich and ennoble our existence. It seems almost miraculous to me that a child, only two or three years of age, can learn the complexities of language. But children take possession of language naturally, as a birthright. And it should be by birthright also that the child learns to read and write, and is therefore enabled to discover the riches of the world and to share those riches with others. I believe with all my heart that every person in the world is entitled to the gift of literacy. We must provide that gift to the best of our ability, for doing so ensures our humanity and makes possible the realization of a more nearly perfect world.

Navarre Scott Momaday,
American novelist, scholar, painter and poet,
and UNESCO Artist for Peace

The Nigerian NGO, Family Re-orientation Education and Empowerment (FREE) was awarded the UNESCO Confucius Prize for Literacy for creating a network of learning centres. It provides literacy skills to adults, especially to women and out-of-school girls.

A TESTIMONY OF HOPE FOR A BELEAGUERED AREA

© FREE

Welcoming Patti Boulaye at Alaere Alaibe's health centre in Opokuma.

A toothy grin appears on Alaere Alaibe's face as she reads another testimony: "Thank you Madam for the wonderful opportunity to be back in school. Now I can write letters to my friends to invite them to my party." This moving testimony was sent by Boma, a former student, to inform Alaibe of her progress since she was transferred to secondary school after spending more than a year at Okolobiri's Adult Literacy Centre in Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

The centre is one of the 27 built by Alaibe's Family Reorientation Education and Empowerment (FREE), a non-government organization set up in November 2005 as a private initiative to bring education to women of the oil-rich but restive Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Reading testimonies of 'students' is how Alaibe commences work in her Lagos office. "We tell them to write the letters in their own handwriting so that we can monitor their progress," she says. But the bulk of her work is in the rural areas of Bayelsa, an area blessed with multi-billion dollar oil reserves, but where, ironically, stark poverty, infrastructural decay and environmental degradation have persisted due to years of neglect and corrupt misappropriation of funds.

Not-for-profit initiative

Education and health facilities are two major areas of need among the poor masses of the Delta. These are the key areas where Alaibe's FREE have been providing support to the neglected people of the region in the last two years. "We do not operate in the urban region. We go

© FREE

A typical class at FREE.

deep into the rural areas of Bayelsa and Delta States, where access is difficult. There are many areas that you can't reach except by spending three or four hours on a boat."

Poor road and water networks and difficult access in many villages and towns can frustrate development plans for the region. But they do not deter Alaibe, 43, whose background is in Bayelsa though she was born and educated in Lagos. "I come from a family of seven girls and two boys who were educated by a poor and illiterate mother in a poor area of Lagos. I thought if my siblings could take turns to help our mother sell fish in the Ajegunle boundary market, and all nine of us have university education now, I think it is only fair to give back to this region," Alaibe says.

Three years before the inauguration of her NGO, she had been rousing rural Bayelsa women folk with a new not-for-profit project, FREE, which has become a useful platform for mass literacy programmes, especially for women who missed their first chance of getting educated. It was her personal initiative that started the project with the creation in 2002 of the first Pioneer Adult and Non-Formal Study Centre at Trofani. Another was soon created at Opokuma. The number of centres grew to 16, spanning 12 communities, after FREE became fully operational in 2005. This remarkable educational project now numbers 27 centres that provide literacy training to some 700 learners and it is spreading to more communities.

In 2006, FREE built the Support for Africa Health Centre in Igbainwari Town, in Bayelsa State, in partnership with the UK-based Support for Africa Foundation of Nigerian-born singer, Patti Boulaye. FREE also organizes education and health seminars and a large number of activities, including free eye tests and the distribution of spectacles to students.

Old women with no education at all are a priority target group for FREE, which also accepts single mothers and youths with missed opportunities. "Our aim in this area is to design a curriculum that will be good enough to make them return to standard schools so that they can fit in with other students," Alaibe says. Lucky students in this category enjoy free scholarships from a bank, negotiated by FREE. Close to 20% of FREE's learners wind up returning to formal education.

Bridging the gap

This method is proving to be a remarkable support system in Nigeria, where only 35% of the population is literate. Although public education is free at the primary and secondary levels, many years of infrastructural decay and official neglect have drastically lowered standards, according to Universal Basic Education (UBE), a Federal Government of Nigeria organization. Literacy is even lower among girls and women, due to social and cultural prejudices, which still prioritize education opportunities for boys. Many families, unable to afford

© FREE

Patti Boulaye (left) et Alaere Alaibe (right), during the inauguration of the Health Centre at Igbainwari.

school uniforms and meals, are prevented from sending their wards to school. Only 15% are able to secure admissions to tertiary institutions every year in a country of 140 million people.

FREE's initiative bridges the gap between expensive private schools and failing public establishments, especially in the Niger Delta. With support from the National Mass Education Commission and teachers who agree to take less than Nigeria's minimum wage – of 5000 Niaras monthly (about US$40) – FREE provides evening classes between 4 and 6 p.m., Monday to Friday, in all its centres.

"It's a volatile region and sometimes we are greeted with aggression. It takes a lot to convince them that we are not calling them out for political reasons," says Alaibe, whose husband, Timi, heads the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), the government agency mandated to bring improvement to the region.

Her privileged position, coupled with people's scepticism about fund-raising methods of NGOs, makes fund-raising difficult. But personal and family resources, corporate support and small contributions from community leaders have helped keep the project alive, and FREE operates with an annual budget of 20 million Niaras, approximately US$150,000.

FREE's message of hope continues through people like Regina Joyful, a community women's leader in Igbogene. She used to thumbprint to cash her money at banks. But after two years with FREE, she proudly announces that she can now append her signature on the cheque book.

Steve Ayorinde,
Nigerian journalist

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Gisèle Pineau.

The alphabet of poverty

A long time ago, I was a merciless schoolteacher. I was barely ten years old and my pupil was close to sixty. I was arrogant from the height of my good fortune. I knew how to read and write. I'd been lucky to be born in a country where school was compulsory from age six. I didn't yet realize how lucky I was. My pupil was my grandmother. A stubborn pupil, narrow-minded, who balked, it seemed to me, at making the little letters of the alphabet enter into her old brain. "It's too late," she moaned. "My head is an arid savannah. My mind is a basket with holes. It's too late…." I lost my temper. It was clear that she wanted to thwart me. "You will learn! It's easy! Come on!" I ordered. "Repeat: A! A! A!" I'd had the good luck to grow up at a time when children weren't forced into the cane fields. I didn't yet realize how lucky I was. My grandmother had watched her neighbours set off on the path to school. There you sang the words formed in letters of all shapes and sizes, like the animals that populated the earth, the seas and the sky. My grandmother, because of poverty, was shown the road that led to the sugarcane field. That's where her arms and sweat and courage were needed. And never mind the letters written in chalk on the blackboard. Never mind the words hung too high for her, inaccessible, reserved for the elite. Now I think of all those children, here and elsewhere, who will never go to school because of poverty, because of wars, because of everyday hell. I think of all those children. Those who go into the fields every morning. Those who dig mines, wearing out their hands and their eyes and their innocence. Those who don't go to school because they are used as slaves, because their bodies are coveted merchandise. Those who are prostituted. Those who spin wool and build houses. Those who beg from morning until night in the sun and in the rain. Those who walk along the roads for stagnant water and stale bread. Those who will never know the joy of reading and writing. Now I realize how lucky I was.

Gisèle Pineau,
Guadalupean novelist

Abdourahman A. Waberi is among the writers who have joined UNESCO in its fight against illiteracy. Here is an extract from his text on the subject, to be published by the Organization in its forthcoming book, 'The Alphabet of Hope'..

THE TWO TRACKS OF MY LIFE

© Gael Le Ny

Abdourahman A. Waberi.

Like many writers of the young nations of the late Third World, I ended up writing because those who had written about my country, my people or my culture (I now put leaden quotation marks around all those notions) did not always give me entire satisfaction. We are aware by now of Chinua Achebe's suspicious examination of the otherwise sublime work of Joseph Conrad. As for myself, I was often left hungry. The maritime adventures of the gentleman, Henry de Monfreid, to cite but one example, are unworthy of the most puerile childishness – sheeka carruureed, as we say in Somali. Yet I don't pretend, obviously, to satisfy all those who read or will read me. I am set on bringing my contribution, simply and modestly, to share with everyone – countrymen, friends, guests passing through and foreigners, of course. For me, reading and writing represent much more than entertainment: they mean participating – sorry, I'm going to use a grand phrase – in the edification of the Nation. Reading and writing are also a way to live. To drift between the here and the elsewhere, two more and more elusive places, indistinct, scintillating with paradox. I continued to advance leaning on the guardrail of writing, to stagger in the spirals of spoken, translated and written poetry, most often in French. I buried myself in the ashes of Paul Celan's language: "Ne cherche pas sur mes lèvres ta bouche, /ni devant le portail l'étranger, /ni dans l'œil la larme…" "Seek not your mouth on my lips, nor a stranger at the gate, /nor a tear in the eye…" (Cristal, Gallimard, 1998). It spoke, it moved and it comforted the foreign student I was at the end of the 1980s and who I never stopped being.

That is how, at less than 30 years old, I entered the educational curriculum of my country. That is how future graduates sweat blood over my short stories (my novels are subjected to a subtle but very effective censorship!) in mid-June, during the Baccalaureate exam, an exam that is still, 20 years into independence, in French and certified by the academy in Bordeaux, Rouen or Besançon. Strange dizziness.

What to read, then? For me, coming from a poor family without books except for a tattered and rarely opened copy of the Koran, I read almost nothing at home. I lived a schizophrenic childhood between two completely separate worlds, torn apart between family and school. Reading (in French, of course) was first accomplished in primary school through the intervention of a sensitive teacher who introduced us to adventure novels. Eugène Sue and his Mysteries of Paris, the great Alexandre Dumas, The Three Musketeers, and the bard Victor Hugo, Les Misérables, were our first green pastures. Later I read, in the pell-mell of life, everything that fell into my hands and arrived as far as my shantytown: last month's issue of the popular French magazines Paris Match and Nous Deux, wet from girlfriends' tears, a used Blek Le Roc comic strip, a Reader's Digest landed from who knows where, a San Antonio detective story or Gérard de Villiers spy novel, if the gods were kind. As an adolescent I travelled on foot the two or three kilometres separating me from the country's only library, the French Cultural Centre Arthur Rimbaud, located in the real town. Having ransacked the comic strip section, I attacked the so-called serious reading, at least at that time in my life, which comprised Albert Camus as well as Christiane Rochefort. At the lycée, I made other discoveries at the Reading Club, run by my French teacher and attended essentially by girls. My friends, who aspired to the serious disciplines (maths, physical sciences) openly despised my reading and my feminine clan. It is only in France that I fully discovered the French- and English-speaking writers of Africa, the Caribbean, India, France or the entire world (from Nuruddin Farah to Derek Walcott, Mario Vargas Llosa to J.M. Coetzee, Walter Benjamin to Joseph Roth, Michel Le Bris to Jacques Lacarrière, Pierre Bergounioux to Tahar Bekri), in short these inspirations that enthral me and lighten the burden of life. I never suspected for an instant that some of these authors I admired could one day become acquaintances, colleagues and even more, friends like Nuruddin Farah. I blithely stepped over the barrier separating the reading and the writing. Reading and writing, the two tracks of my life.

Abdourahman A. Waberi,
Djiboutian writer

LITERACY KEY DATES

1946 – The newly-created Organization sets literacy as one of its first major concerns and appoints a special committee to study in depth the new concept of fundamental education.

1947 – The Organization issues its first publication, 'Fundamental Education: Common Ground for All Peoples', including the first-ever world survey on illiteracy.

1948 – The United Nations adopts the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaiming education as a right for everyone – children, youth and adults – in Article 26.

1949 – In cooperation with other UN agencies, UNESCO launches pilot projects in education in China, Haiti, Tanganyika (today the United Republic of Tanzania) and Peru. Regional meetings in Asia and Latin America also study needs and define objectives.

1951-1952 – Rural fundamental education centres open in Mexico and Egypt, producing reading materials in indigenous languages and using audio-visual methods.

1960 – The second world conference on adult education in Montreal (Canada) proposes to launch a massive campaign for the eradication of illiteracy with the support of industrialized countries.

1965 – The first world congress on the eradication of illiteracy in Tehran (Islamic Republic of Iran) links functional literacy to economic development.

1967 – To demonstrate the advantages of literacy from the economic and social standpoints, the first four projects of the Experimental World Literacy Programme are launched. A total of 22 countries take part in the programme.

1967 – The first International Literacy Day is celebrated on 8 September. UNESCO awards the first literacy prizes.

1975 – An international symposium in Persepolis (Islamic Republic of Iran) underlines links between literacy and politically active participation in socio-economic transformation.

1981-1989 – Regional projects combining the extension of primary education and the eradication of illiteracy, each one adapted to the different regions' needs, are launched successively.

1990 – The world conference in Jomtien (Thailand) revitalizes the concept of basic education, once again intensifying activities in adult literacy and primary education.

1990 – The proclamation of International Literacy Year provides the international community with an opportunity to address the decline in basic education in many parts of the least developed countries and the continued existence of mass illiteracy worldwide.

1993 – Nine high-population countries representing 72 per cent of the world's illiterates hold a summit in New Delhi (India) to address issues with particular regard to increasing the gross national product set aside for basic education.

2000 – At the World Education Forum in Dakar (Senegal), governments, NGOs and IGOs reaffirm their global commitment to education for all and pledge to achieve six goals by 2015.

2003 – To place literacy high on the international agenda, the General Assembly proclaims the United Nations Literacy Decade, with UNESCO as coordinating agency. The Director-General designates Laura Bush, First Lady of the United States, Honorary Ambassador for the Decade.

2005 – UNESCO creates the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE). The ten-year collaborative framework targets the world's 35 most challenged countries, which are home to 85% of the world's illiterates.

2006 – An independent team housed at UNESCO publishes the latest Global Monitoring Report on Education for All. Entitled 'Literacy for Life', it assesses the current situation of world literacy and the prospects of achieving the Dakar goals for reducing illiteracy.

2007 – The first three of a series of regional conferences meet in March (Doha, Qatar), in July (Beijing, China) and in September (Bamako, Mali).

Sources UNESCO: *50 Years for Education*, 1997; *The Plurality of Literacy*, 2004; *Literacy for Life, EFA Global Monitoring Report* 2006.

José Banaag,
Editorial assistant

In the book The Alphabet of Hope, UNESCO brought together today's masters of the written word to advocate Literacy for All and promote sustainable literate environments. Some excerpts:

WRITERS FOR LITERACY

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"I find myself through my readers, I understand what I wrote when I see that others understand it too, but never before."
Paulo Coelho (Brazil)

"And since only a few letters (two or three thousand in Asia, I am told, fewer than thirty in the West) suffice to formulate all human languages, then words are indeed the foundation of all cultures, of all nations."
Marc Lévy (France)

© Denis Lécuyer and Marc Hansel

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"Reading is an activity that has always been regarded with mitigated enthusiasm by those who govern us. It is not by chance that, in the 18th and 19th centuries, laws were passed forbidding slaves to read, even the Bible."
Alberto Manguel (Argentina)

"Macon focused his eyes on his son. "Papa couldn't read, couldn't even sign his name… He should have let me teach him. Everything bad that ever happened to him happened because he couldn't read."
Toni Morrison (United States of America)

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"Remember you are writing, not for critics, academics, or other writers, but for your own people who, in their silence and perhaps poverty, cannot express their aspirations and anguish. You are their voice but only if you have not deserted or betrayed them."
Franceso Sionil José (Philippines)

"He felt ashamed, and placed the volume in the little boy's hand: "Take this, it's yours!" The child grasped it contentedly: "OK… but I cannot read yet." "Neither can I," said Vell . The little boy laughed, he thought the old man was joking."
Miklós Vamós (Hungary)

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"Maybe the ability to read isn't something one absolutely needs to get by in this world. Still, if there are people who have the desire to read or write but are never given the chance, that's not right. The world matured long enough ago that it ought to be able to give that chance to everyone"
Banana Yoshimoto (Japan)

Extracts chosen by **José Banaag,** Editorial assistant (UNESCO)

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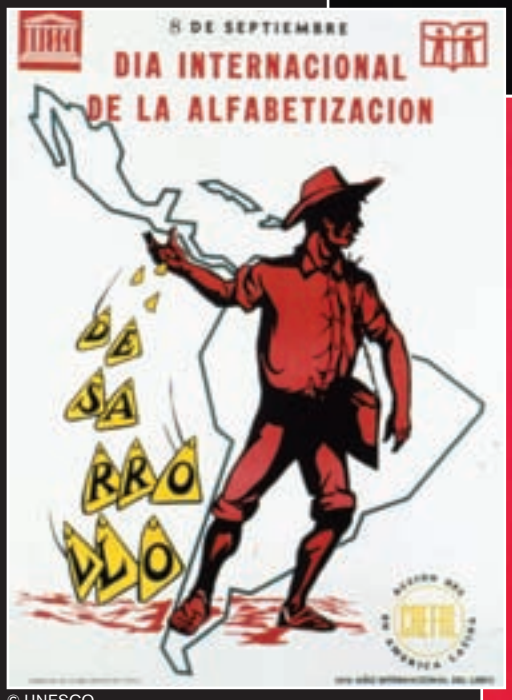

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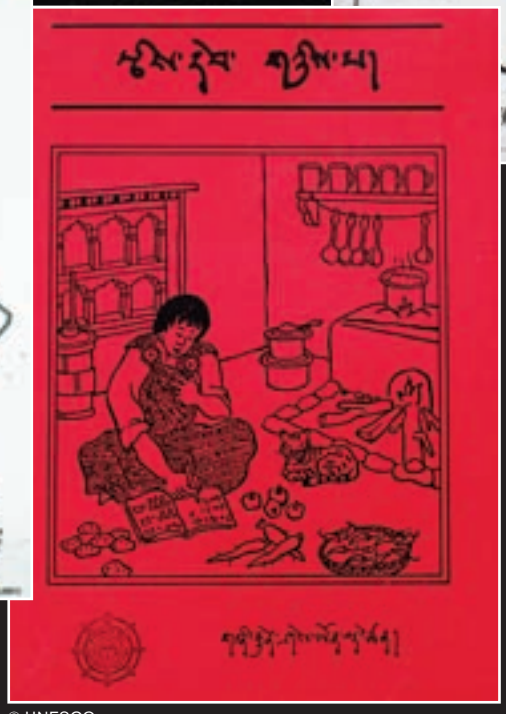

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